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# Update on Mars Bluff Navy Yard/CSS *Pee Dee* Cannons Investigations

James D. Spirek

*University of South Carolina - Columbia*, [spirekj@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:spirekj@mailbox.sc.edu)

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# Maritime Research Division

## Update on Mars Bluff Navy Yard / CSS *Pee Dee* Cannons Investigations

By James D. Spirek

We are still working to document and to prepare for the recovery of three cannons that were thrown overboard by the CSS *Pee Dee* in the Great Pee Dee River at the Mars Bluff Navy Yard during the waning days of the Civil War (Fig. 1). The armament of the Confederate gunboat consisted of two Brooke rifles, a 6.4-inch and a 7-inch, and a 9-inch Dahlgren smoothbore. These guns were the premiere naval weapons of the Civil War. Until recently, we had only verified the presence of two of the three cannons—the 6.4-in Brooke rifle and the 9-in Dahlgren smoothbore.

These two cannons were found a number of years ago by the CSS *Pee*

of munitions associated with the two Brooke guns, but interestingly none for the Dahlgren. These items are now on display at the South Carolina Civil War Museum in Myrtle Beach operated by Gragg (Fig. 2). Joe Beatty, MRD archaeological technician, and I recently visited the museum and were impressed with the artifacts and interpretive materials that Ted and his wife Connie have created for the exhibit. I would suggest that if you are in Myrtle Beach, visit the museum, and take a look at this important Civil War naval collection. Gragg has also published a book entitled *Guns of the Pee Dee: The Search for the Warship CSS Pee Dee's Cannons* that relates

cesium magnetometer, the remains of the 7-inch cannon remained obscured by sand, trees, and other magnetic debris. That is, until the adjacent landowners, Glenn Dutton and Rufus Perdue, decided to take advantage of extremely low-water to give it a go and search for the cannon themselves. Observing two piling stumps further in the stream that only appear at very low river levels, the pair deployed a metal detector and searched around that area. Noting a magnetic disturbance that corresponded in length to a large object, the men recorded their findings on a map of the site, and alerted us to its potential discovery.

On 4 December 2012, the MRD deployed to verify the discovery of the 7-inch Brooke rifle. Gathering together our crew and volunteers (Ted Gragg, Bob and Chad Butler, David and Cody Freeman), and assisted by Glenn Dutton and Rufus Perdue, we located the object with our metal detector and immediately excavated several feet of sand to find the muzzle of the cannon. The cannon lays parallel to the river with its muzzle pointed upriver. Next, we inserted a GoPro Hero2 underwater camera down the bore of the cannon and noted the rifling was in excellent condition. As mentioned above, the elusive nature of the cannon was puzzling because of the lack of a large magnetic presence, especially as the mass of iron weighs approximately 15,000 pounds. Another factor obscuring its location was that it was thrown a bit further into the stream, rather than nearer the riverbank like the other two. We had planned to systematically weed through a number of large magnetic anomalies along the shoreline and towards the river channel in the future to search for the gun, but were saved the time and expense by the landowners' discovery of the gun.

Now that all three cannons are

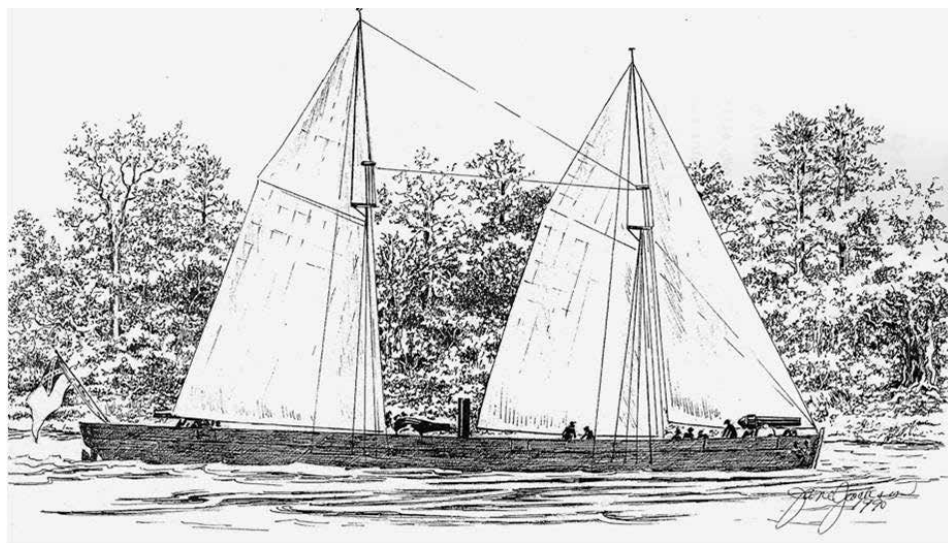


Fig. 1: Modern rendering of CSS *Pee Dee*. (Drawing by)

Dee Research and Recovery Team led by Ted Gragg and Bob Butler. Their group was originally licensed by the Maritime Research Division through an Intensive Survey License that evolved into a Data Recovery License to investigate the river bottom alongside the abandoned navy yard. Besides discovering and documenting the two cannons, the group recorded and recovered a number of artifacts, including carpenter and shipbuilding tools and other sundry items. They also recovered a number

the team's odyssey to investigate the remains of the gunboat, armament, and the navy yard.

An archaeological conundrum developed during the course of these investigations in that each caliber shell for the Brooke rifles was present but the physical remains of the 7-inch cannon proved elusive (Fig. 3). Despite methodically searching the waterfront, and along the apparent line of the two other jettisoned cannons, with physical probing, excavation, and deploying a



Fig. 2: Display of navy yard tools, parts of a cook stove, and other sundry items recovered from the waterfront of the Mars Bluff Navy Yard. (SCIAA photo)

accounted for, there still remains one mystery—where did the Dahlgren come from? The pedigree's of the two Brooke rifles are known, both cast in Selma, AL and shipped directly to the Mars Bluff Navy Yard to arm the gunboat in 1864. Markings on the trunnions and breech of the Dahlgren indicate it was cast in Fort Pitt, PA in mid-1862 (Fig. 4). According to research undertaken by Dr. Larry Babits, now retired director of the Program in Maritime Studies at East Carolina University, posited that the gun was captured from one of three Union gunboats due to the manufacture of the Dahlgren in mid-1862. Two of the Union gunboats were out west, which seemed unlikely for the Dahlgren to have come that far due to the railroad logistics at that time in the war. Whereas the Confederate salvage of the 9-inch battery, consisting of five 9-inch Dahlgren smoothbores, off the rammed and sunk USS *Southfield* on the Roanoke River at Plymouth, NC seemed a more viable candidate, particularly as

the railroad logistics were conducive for transporting the gun to Mars Bluff.

Dr. Babits' research indicating that the USS *Southfield* seemed the most viable candidate for the Confederates to obtain a captured 9-inch Dahlgren intrigued me greatly, considering that I had written

my graduate thesis on the remains of the gunboat while a student at ECU. I immediately poured over my notes to see if I had come across any information

match the one in the river. A glimmer of hope was revived when correspondence concerning the armament of the gunboat in early 1864 indicated that two 9-inch Dahlgren guns were headed to *Southfield* to replace two damaged guns. On 30 March 1864, the guns arrived in Plymouth and were immediately placed aboard the gunboat. If the *Pee Dee* Dahlgren gun is from the *Southfield*, then it must be one of these two that arrived just in time for its penultimate engagement with the CSS *Albemarle* that destroyed the Union gunboat in the early morning hours of 18 April 1864.

The MRD intends to launch a research foray at the National Archives in Washington, DC, to answer these questions using Union navy correspondence, as well as to gather information from Confederate



Fig. 4: Underwater image of the 9-inch Dahlgren smoothbore in the river. (SCIAA photo)

on the markings on the *Southfield* guns. When reviewing my notes associated with a Confederate attack on Union army and naval forces in Plymouth in December 1862, in which the *Southfield* was disabled,

I hit paydirt. The captain of *Southfield*, responding to an inquiry of the conduct of the gunboat during the attack, listed each of his guns along with their markings. Perusing the markings of the five 9-inch guns indicated that they were cast before the war had commenced, and therefore did not

correspondence, relating to the identity of this 9-inch Dahlgren. In the meantime, we are finalizing the necessary material requested by the U.S. General Services Administration, the Federal agency that owns this historic property on behalf of the American public, to obtain an indefinite loan to display the cannons at the new Florence County Museum. Additionally, we are preparing information to create a Request For Proposal to recover, conserve, and transport the cannons. We hope to raise the cannons in late fall 2013. These research activities are funded by a Drs. Bruce & Lee Foundation grant and are greatly appreciated. Look to upcoming issues of *Legacy* for updates on this project.



Fig. 3: A 7-inch Brooke rifle at the Washington Navy Yard. (SCIAA photo)